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# Tammy Baldwin: Proposed drug benefit fails elderly

**By Rep. Tammy Baldwin**  
**November 22, 2003**

Make no mistake about it: The Medicare bill that Congress is now considering is an attempt to dismantle the Medicare program.

Since 1965, Medicare has provided affordable and reliable health care insurance to our nation's seniors. With the addition of a real prescription drug benefit, Medicare would continue to ensure the health of more than 40 million beneficiaries. I am sorry to report that the bill being considered offers a meager prescription drug benefit, does nothing to control the skyrocketing price of prescription drugs, and begins to dismantle the entire Medicare program.

When I am home in Wisconsin, I constantly hear from constituents who cannot afford their prescription drugs. Seniors stop me at the supermarket and on the street to tell me heartbreaking stories about how they skip doses or cut pills in half to reduce their drug costs. All of these stories end with seniors asking for a real prescription drug benefit in Medicare.

This bill, however, would not provide seniors with the benefit they need and deserve. Instead of helping seniors obtain affordable prescription drugs, this bill would provide partial coverage of a senior's drug spending until it reaches \$2,250 and then it leaves seniors high and dry. There is a huge gap in coverage where seniors would have to pay 100 percent of their drug costs, yet continue paying premiums, until their total drug costs reach about \$5,000. About half of all seniors would fall into this gaping hole. I believe seniors deserve affordable drug coverage and I do not believe this bill delivers it.

Also, seniors would have to join HMOs and private insurance plans to get the meager benefit, meaning that premiums and benefits would vary across the country, and seniors would not be able to choose their own doctor or pharmacy. Even more infuriating, the lawmakers who crafted the bill are not sure that these private insurers would be able to provide the prescription drug benefit at all. Private insurers do not provide this type of prescription drug benefit now. So the bill includes a \$14.2 billion sweetener to encourage private insurers to play along.

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This bill does nothing to address the ever-rising cost of prescription drugs. Instead of including measures to ensure that drugs are affordable, this bill actually would prohibit the federal government from negotiating lower drug prices for Medicare beneficiaries. Also, the bill does not allow seniors to obtain affordable drugs from Canada.

Worse yet, while we were trying to create a real prescription drug benefit, the drafters of this bill included a section that has nothing to do with prescription drugs at all. This provision turns Medicare into a voucher program in seven years and forces Medicare to compete with private insurance plans. We know from past experience that the youngest and healthiest seniors will go to private insurers, leaving the sickest and frailest seniors in Medicare, automatically driving up Medicare's costs. Those Republicans who have long had it out for Medicare will then have the ammunition they need to dismantle it entirely.

This bill does include unprecedented benefits - unfortunately those benefits go predominantly to the politically connected pharmaceutical and insurance industries, rather than to America's seniors who need relief.

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